



# FIELD NOTES | UNDERSTANDING YOUTH THROUGH EMPATHY MAPPING

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How can you meaningfully engage youth in community change? How can we design a strategy to ensure youth leadership and youth voices are at the center of Tamarack's work without getting to know the wants and needs of young people? In this field note, you'll see how an Empathy Map can help your initiative gain insight into the needs of those you are hoping to impact.



## CONTEXT

Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYF) is committing engaging youth with lived experience and living experience, by creating meaningful roles for youth (aged 15 to 30) in all aspects of the initiative. Between July to August 2020, the CBYF team commenced a Discovery Phase, including interviewing eight stakeholders from across Canada, representing youth leaders and youth serving organizations. This initial Discovery Phase was meant to highlight stories about youth engagement (including successes, challenges and lessons learned).

A summary of this work was captured in an Empathy Map, as a means of helping CBYF to develop a shared understanding of youth. An [Empathy Map](#) is a visualization that helps you to consider the perspectives of those who your project serves or affects. It is easy to rely on our assumptions when designing services or developing initiatives. While you can never truly experience another person's perspective, an empathy maps allows us to challenge what we

### Meet the Practitioners

Communities Building Youth Futures is a five-year strategy to work with up to 13 communities across Canada to develop Collective Impact and system-wide solutions for a minimum of 5,000 youth as they build and act upon plans for their future. This strategy is funded by the Government of Canada through the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy and delivered by Tamarack Institute.

Learn more about [Communities Building Youth Futures](#)

### Acknowledgements

CBYF thanks the youth and service providers across Canada who shared their stories, experiences and expertise.

The team who facilitated this process live, work and play in Tkaronto, located on the Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. We thank them for the care they provide to this land.

think we know about those impacted by our project and gain a better understanding of their needs.

A few common words came up during our conversations with young people and organizations. Included below are definitions and examples from literature.

**Youth engagement:** When young people are involved in responsible, challenging actions to create positive social change.

*“Youth engagement is a win-win proposition. Young people benefit by gaining skills, knowledge, self-esteem, and connectedness. Adults benefit by enhancing their own competencies, learning to better understand and value youth, and increasing their commitment and energy to their organizations. Organizations benefit by improving their programs, gaining community recognition, and attracting funders. Communities benefit by improving quality of life, coordinating youth services, and authentically embracing diversity by representing young people.”* ([ACT for Youth Center for Community Action](#), 2020)

**Ageism:** Stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against people, based on their age.

*“Ageism is one of the underlying causes of many of the barriers that young people face. Challenges in one area of life only serve to reinforce and amplify challenges in others.”* ([#AgeingEqual](#), 2018)

**Intersectionality:** Being conscious that we have different things that make up our identity ([SOY H.E.A.T.](#), 2016).

*“African-American girls are 6 times more likely to get suspended than white girls. That’s probably a race and a gender problem. It’s not just a race problem and it’s not just a gender problem...Think about how the convergence of race stereotypes or gender stereotypes might actually play out in the classroom, between teachers and students.”* (([Kimberlé Crenshaw](#), 2018)

**Tokenism:** the policy or practice of making only a symbolic effort ([Merriam Webster Dictionary](#), 2020).

*“Youth and young adults are often tokenized, placed individually on committees or panels to “check the box” of youth engagement.”* ([Aspen Institute](#), 2017)





## INSIGHTS

In September 2020, 8 youth completed a review of the Empathy Map and additional insights were captured.

### When I hear “youth engagement”, I think

- Getting youth involved
- Collaboration, change and enhancing different perspectives
- Lived experience
- Involving youth in levels of the work
- Empowering youth to have a voice

“The people who were there were listening to me and they weren’t just checking a box.”

### What resonates with youth?

- Do you really want to talk to me? Are you just trying to check a box? Eliminate tokenizing youth
- Listening and being heard – I feel engaged when you ask for my opinion
- Being accountable and transparent – I want to know what you do with what I share with you. I want to provide input throughout the process, not just at the beginning
- Treating youth as equals – I can see things from a different and fresh perspective. I want you to value the experience I am bringing; engagement goes both ways.
- Challenging bias and discrimination – I stand up for myself and for what I believe in
- Engaging youth is ongoing – how will you continue engaging with me once you’ve started?
- Thinking of my peers as leaders and mentors – I value and want to hear from youth who have different ways of seeing things because of their lived and living experience

### What’s missing and important?

- Youth-led initiatives – youth need more power to create and implement their own projects
- Youth need to be part of the “how”, not just give insights or feedback
- Youth who come from difficult situations don’t always get to express their voice. There needs to be diverse representation from a range of youth with different experiences
- (Adult allies and organizations) need to take a trauma-informed approach because someone may have no idea what a youth has gone through.

## CONCLUSIONS

This Empathy Map is the first step to designing a commitment to youth engagement for Communities Building Youth Futures. The additional insights shared by youth, highlight a need to deepen this work, take a trauma-informed approach and hear from a more diverse range of experiences. By listening to the stories and experiences of young people, we are better able to empathize and understand the perspective of those we hope to collaborate with – youth in Canada aged 15 to 30.

Building from this Empathy Map, we will be co-designing a set of Guiding Principles that consider meaningful engagement of youth in shared leadership, decision making, and through input/consultation within CBYF. The next phase will help us generate ideas and solutions, along with provide guidance to CBYF about how to achieve goals, strategies and objectives in a way that meaningfully engages young people.



## TOOLS

- Join the [Communities Building Youth Futures newsletter](#) and stay informed of the latest collaboration and community change to support young people
- This [Empathy Map Tool](#) will help you consider the perspectives of those who your project serves or affects.
- Read about [Canada's Youth Policy](#).
- Learn how to achieve youth collaboration and success through youth and adult engagement from the [Aspen Forum for Community Solutions](#).
- Read in-depth information about youth engagement, as well as practical strategies for engaging youth through the BC [Youth Engagement Toolkit](#).
- Read this case study about [Engaging Youth Authentically](#) by Volunteer Canada.